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THE WRITINGS OF KING ALFRED

d. 901

BY

FREDERIC HARRISON, M.A.
HONORARY FELLOW OF WADHAM COLLEGE, OXFORD

(*An Address delivered at Harvard College, Mass., March, 1901*)

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The Writings of King Alfred

(Died 901)

In the great days of antique culture, when the citizen of Athens, coming from the Academus or the Stoa, found himself in the Museum of Alexandria, or in the schools of Syracuse, Magna Græcia, Asia Minor, or Tyre, he felt that he was still in his own country, both intellectually and morally, whatever might be the state or nation to which he had travelled. He and his guests spoke but one language, shared the same civilisation, and had in common the same immortal literature.

And now, a son of Oxford or Cambridge in the old island feels himself at home, amongst his own people and fellow-students, when he is welcomed at Harvard of the new continent. We all have but one language, the tongue now spoken by 130,000,000 of civilised men; and we have the same literature, the noblest literature of the modern world. And so, when I was honoured with the invitation to address you, I bethought me I would speak to you of the rise of that literature which is our common heritage, which more than race, or institutions, or manners and habits, makes us all *one* — which is far the richest, the most con-

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tinuous, the most virile evolution of human genius in the records of Christendom.

I call to mind also that this year is the millenary or thousandth anniversary of the death, in 901, of Alfred the West Saxon King,[1] who is undoubtedly the founder of a regular prose literature, as of so many other English institutions and ways. Could there be a fitter theme for an English man of letters in an American seat of learning? There was nothing insular about Alfred; he was not British; he was not feudal; his memory is not stained by any crime done in the struggles of nation, politics, or religion. He lived ages before "Great Britain" was invented, mainly, I believe, in order to humour our Scotch brother-citizens; ages before Protestantism divided Christendom; ages before kingship ceased to be useful and republics began to be normal. Alfred was never King of England: he lived and died King of the West Saxons, the ancestral head of a Saxon clan. He and his people were just as much your ancestors as they were mine, for all we can say is, that the 130,000,000 who speak our Anglo-Saxon tongue have all a fairly equal claim to look on him as the heroic leader of our remote forefathers.[2]

[1] The year 901 is accepted by historians as the date of Alfred's death. Recent research by competent paleographers has made it more probable that he died in 899 or 900. See articles and letters in the *English Historical Review*, *Athenæum*, etc. The Millenary Commemoration Committee decided not to enter on the debated problem, but to adhere to the date generally recognised when the committee was formed.

[2] A large representative committee, of which the Queen is patron, was formed in 1898 to commemorate the thousandth anniversary of Alfred's death. A grand colos-

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But I wish now to speak of Alfred not as our father in blood, or in nation, but as the real father of native prose, that common inheritance of us all, which, after a thousand years of fertility, has lost none of its vigour, its purity, and its wealth. The thousandth anniversary of his death has aroused new attention to his work, and has produced some important books to which I will direct your notice. Of Alfred the man, the warrior, the statesman, the hero, the saint, I will not now speak. In each of these characters he was perfect, — the purest, grandest, most heroic soul that ever sprang from our race. It is only of Alfred the writer of books, the creator of Saxon prose, that I wish to speak. He was indeed one of those rare rulers of men who trust to the book as much as to the sword, who value the school more than the court, who believe in no force but the force of thought and of truth.

In that noble and pathetic preface to his *Pastoral Care*, Alfred himself has told us how and why he carried through the restoration of learning in his church and people. When the first long struggle with the Danes was over, he found his kingdom desolate, and ignorance universal. There was not one, he says, on this side of Humber who could understand their mass-book or put a letter from Latin into Eng-

sal statue by Mr. Hamo Thorneycroft, R.A., is now being raised at Winchester, where he lived and died, by British and American subscribers. The Hon. Secretary of the English committee is Mr. Alfred Bowker, Mayor of Winchester. The Hon. Treasurer is Lord Avebury, of Robarts, Lubbock & Co., Lombard Street, London.

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lish. He groaned to think how learning had flourished before the great invasion. He wondered how the good and wise men of old had omitted to translate their Latin books into English, so that the people might read them and hear them read. He supposes they could not believe that learning would die down so utterly. And so the great King set himself to work with all the fire of one who was both hero and genius to the twofold task, first, to restore learning and found a national education, and secondly to put the great books of the world into the mother-tongue of his people. For the first, he gathered round him scholars from all parts, without distinction of country or race, Welsh, Celts, Mercians, Flemings, Westphalians, as well as men of Wessex and Kent. The second task he undertook himself. Having mastered Latin late in manhood after strenuous toil, he became the first of translators, and in so doing he founded a prose literature.

As a boy, Alfred had shown his zest for study. He had been taken to Rome and to the Court of the Frank King.[1] But from the age of eighteen he was occupied for twenty years with desperate wars and the reorganisation of his kingdom. It was not until he had been king sixteen years, and was thirty-eight years old, that he found himself free for literary work. That he did all this, as he tells us with stately

[1] I incline to think that when Ethelwulf sent the boy to Rome at the age of four, Alfred remained there for perhaps over two years till his father brought him back; and, though he did not learn to read, his childish mind was filled with what he there heard of antiquity and of the Christian world.

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pathos, "in the various and manifold worldly cares that oft troubled him both in mind and in body," is to me one of the most mysterious tales of intellectual passion in the history of human thought. It places him in the rare rank of those warriors and rulers who, amidst all the battle of their lives, have left the world imperishable works of their own composition, such as did David, Julius Cæsar, and Marcus Aurelius.[1]

The works of Alfred are numerous, important, and admirably chosen.[2] His *Handbook* — a sort of anthology or golden treasury of fine thoughts which he collected whilst Asser was reading to him and teaching him to translate — has utterly perished, though William of Malmesbury, two centuries later, used and cited it. Ah! how many libraries of volumes would we willingly lose to-day if time would give up to us from its Lethean maw that well-thumbed book, "about the size of a Psalter," that the holy king was wont to keep in his bosom: the book wherein from day to day he noted down in English some great thought that had impressed him in his studies.

[1] See Pauli. *Life of Alfred the Great*, 1851, translated by B. Thorpe, Bohn's Ecclesiastical Library, 1857, with text and translation of the *Orosius*; also the Jubilee Edition of *Alfred's Works*, 1852–1853. The latest account of Alfred's career as king, warrior, lawgiver, scholar, and author is to be found in the volume published by the Alfred Commemoration Committee. *Alfred the Great* (Adam and Charles Black), London, 1899. 8vo.

[2] For the writings of King Alfred, consult the work just referred to and the essays therein of the Bishop of Bristol, and Rev. Professor Earle; also see Mr. Stopford Brooke's *English Literature to the Norman Conquest*. Macmillan & Co., 1898. 8vo. Chapter xiv, and R. P. Wülker's *Grundriss zur Geschichte der Angelsächsischen Litteratur*.

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After his personal *Handbook* of thoughts came Alfred's *Laws*,[1] which we possess intact in several versions. This book for literary purposes is interesting only by its preface, evidently dictated by the King himself. Here we have in a sentence that spirit of order, of simplicity, of modesty, of self-control, of respect for public opinion, of reverence for the past time, and of solemn consideration of the times to come, which stamps the whole career of Alfred as ruler.

"I, Alfred the King, gathered these laws together and ordered many to be written which our forefathers held, such as I approved; and many which I approved not I rejected, and had other ordinances enacted with the counsel of my Witan; for I dared not venture to set much of my own upon the Statute-book, for I knew not what might be approved by those who should come after us. But such ordinances as I found, either in the time of my kinsman Ina, or of Offa, King of the Mercians, or of Ethelberht, who first received baptism in England — such as seemed to me rightest I have collected here, and the rest I have let drop. I, then, Alfred, King of the West Saxons, showed these laws to all my Witan, and they then said that they all approved of them as proper to be holden."

There spoke the soul of the true conservative, moderate, and far-seeing chief of a free people, a creator of states, such as were Solon and Trajan in antiquity; such as were, in later days, some adored chief of a free people, a William the Silent, or a George Washington.

The books of which Alfred is certainly and strictly

[1] Dr. Felix Liebermann's *Gesetze der Angelsächsen*, 1898, etc. 4to. The latest critical edition of the Saxon laws; also see the essay, in the joint volume, by Professor Sir Frederick Pollock.

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the author are five in number; all translations or adaptations from the Latin, and all typical works of standard authority. They were evidently selected with a broad and discerning judgment. Alfred's mind was essentially historic and cosmopolitan. So he began with the standard text-book of general history, the work of St. Augustine's disciple and colleague, Orosius, of the fifth century. Alfred again was preëminently the patriot — the *parens patriæ*. And accordingly he chose the *History of the Church in England*, or rather the Christian history of the Anglo-Saxon federation, by the Venerable Bede, to give his people the annals of their own ancestors. Alfred again felt a prime need of restoring the church in knowledge and in zeal. And so he translated the famous *Pastoral Care* of Gregory the Great — the accepted manual for training to the priestly office. A second work of Pope Gregory which he translated was the *Dialogues*, a collection of popular tales. Lastly, came the translation, paraphrase, or recasting of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* — far the most original and important of all Alfred's writings. He thus provided (1) a history of the world, (2) a history of his own country, (3) a text-book of education of the priesthood, (4) a people's story book, (5) moral and religious meditations. I will speak of each of these, but principally of the last, the *Boethius*, which, by its originality and its beauty, gives us far the truest insight into the inner faith and the literary genius of the King.

There were some other works in which his impulse

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is seen, but where his actual hand is not certainly to be proved. First and foremost comes the *Saxon Chronicle*,[1] the most authentic and important record of its youth which any modern nation possesses. During the active life of Alfred this yearly record of events is undoubtedly of contemporaneous authorship; and for the most important years of Alfred's reign it is very full and keenly interesting. The evidence is conclusive that the King gave the most powerful stimulus to the compilation of the record, and thus was the founder of a systematic history of our country; for we may truly say that no error of the least importance has ever been proven against the *Chronicle*, which is properly regarded as the touchstone of historic veracity to which all other annals are submitted. It is to my judgment clear that the history of the wars with the Danes as told in the *Chronicle* was prepared under the personal direction of the chief himself, if it was not actually dictated by his lips.

The King is said to have begun a translation of the *Psalms* of David, which was cut short by his death; but of these we have no known copy. The *Soliloquies* of St. Augustine[2] is of his age, and has been imputed to his authorship. I incline to the belief that the preface is his own work, and that he superintended, if he did not execute, the translation. The same may

[1] *Saxon Chronicle.* Text of all manuscripts and translation by B. Thorpe. Rolls Series, 1861.

[2] *Soliloquies of St. Augustine.* Text in *The Shrine*, by Rev. T. Oswald Cockayne, 1864–1870. 8vo.

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be the truth of the *Book of Martyrs*.[1] Lastly, there is the King's *Testament*, which, though highly interesting, is hardly a literary composition. No one accepts the authenticity of the *Proverbs of Alfred*, composed some centuries later, nor do we attribute to him the translation of the *Fables of Æsop*, nor the treatise on Falconry. But these and some other works that are ascribed to him testify to the belief of ages long after his death that his literary activity was of wide range and of permanent value.

After studying the arguments of the Anglo-Saxon scholars about the order of time in the composition of these works, I incline to the view of Mr. Stopford Brooke in his *History of English Literature to the Norman Conquest, 1898*. He makes the order this,— the *Pastoral Care*, the *Bede*, the *Orosius*, and lastly the *Boethius*. This, at least, is the order I shall adopt; and it certainly lends itself best to the literary estimate. Most authorities put the *Boethius* earlier. But we must not rely too exclusively on paleography and dialectic variations in this matter. Paleographists and the dialect experts wage incessantly their own civil wars, and I am not always ready to swear fealty to the victor or the survivor of the hour.[2] A consensus of paleographists and experts in dialect is conclusive, or conclusive as far as it goes. But until we know all the circumstances under which a given manuscript was written, I am not prepared to surrender my own

[1] *Book of Martyrs.* Text in *The Shrine.*

[2] Wülker (*op. cit.*) gives a table of these differences amongst the editors.

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common sense. There is a historical and a literary *flair* in these things, which ought not to be lightly distrusted, unless contradicted by indisputable written proof. We have no reason to suppose that Alfred wrote much, or even at all, with his own hand. Most great men of action dictate, and do not hold the pen. And the fact that a given manuscript has traces of a Mercian or a Northumbrian dialect is no sufficient proof that it could not be Alfred's work, unless we can prove that no Mercian, no Northumbrian, ever copied a book which Alfred had dictated, composed, or directed to be written.

The naïf and pathetic preface to the *Pastoral Care*[1] of Pope Gregory the Great is unquestionably the King's own work, and is a touching revelation of his intense love for his native land and his passion to give his people a higher education. I cannot read that simple outpouring of soul by the great reformer without seeing the confession that it was a most urgent task, and his own first attempt at translating; and thus I judge it to come next after his *Handbook* and his *Laws*. It was natural that a great and systematic restorer of learning should begin with the training of those who were to teach. And thus Alfred's first great literary work was the translation of the standard manual for the education of the clergy and of other scholars. He would often meditate, he says, what wise men, what happy times there were of old in

[1] *Cura Pastoralis*. Text and translation, edited by H. Sweet. Early English Text Society, 1871. 8vo. For the preface, see Stopford Brooke, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

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England, how kings preserved peace, morality, and order at home, and enlarged their borders without, how foreigners came to the land in search of wisdom and instruction. Now, he groans out, all is changed, and in these days of war and distress hardly a man could read a Latin book. And yet, he adds, what punishments would come upon us if we neither loved wisdom nor suffered other men to obtain it: we should love the name only of Christian, and very few of the virtues. Then he goes on to speak of the ravages and burnings of the Danes, how the few books left were in Latin, and how few Englishmen could read that tongue. "Therefore," he says, "it seems better to me to translate some books, which are most needful for all men to know, into the language which we can all understand. And this I would have you do, if we can preserve peace, to set all the youth now in England of free men, whose circumstances enable them to devote themselves to it, to learn as long as they are not old enough for other occupations, until they are well able to read English writing." Here was a scheme of primary education for the people, education which was not made effective in our country until my own lifetime. And then he goes on to the higher education, ordaining that "those be afterwards taught more in the Latin language who are to continue learning and be promoted to a higher rank." Next, he tells us how he began "among other various and manifold troubles of this kingdom to translate into English the book which is called in Latin *Pastoralis*,

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and in English *Shepherd's Book*, sometimes word for word, and sometimes according to the sense, as I had learnt it from Plegmund, my Archbishop, and Asser, my bishop, and Grimbold, my mass-priest, and John, my mass-priest. And when I had learnt it, as I could best understand it, and as I could most clearly interpret it, I translated it into English; and I will send a copy to every bishopric in my kingdom."

Here, then, is a great ruler, more than a thousand years ago, when the area and population of his own country were far below those of this state, when their very existence was at stake, and they were surrounded by ferocious invaders, who designs a scheme for primary and superior education, and restores the church and the schools. Here is the man who began, and certainly had he been longer lived and enjoyed peace, might have carried through, the translation of the Bible, seven centuries before it was actually accomplished. There is a most fascinating relic connected with this very work. The Bodleian Library at Oxford possesses the very copy which the King sent to Worcester. It is inscribed ÐEOS BÔC SCEAL TO WIOGARA CEASTRE, *i.e. This book shall (go) to Worcester.*[1] I saw it when I was last in Oxford. And when I took in my own hands the very copy of his toil which Alfred a thousand years ago sent with his greeting to his Bishop at Worcester, which he solemnly commanded in the name of God no man should remove from the Minster; when I held in my hand in the Ashmolean

[1] Bodleian Library. Manuscripts. Hatton, 20.

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Museum[1] the very jewel which the King had made for himself (perhaps to bear upon his sceptre) inscribed, — *Ælfred had me worked*, — I felt something of that thrill which men of old felt when they kissed a fragment of the true cross, or which the Romans felt when they saluted the Sibylline books. If to-day we fall short in the power of mystical imagination, our saner relic-worship is founded upon history, scholarship, and jealous searching into the minutest footprints of the past.

Of the *Dialogues* of Gregory, we need say little, for the translation as yet exists only in three manuscripts. But I follow the view of Professor Earle, that the book is the King's work, as the characteristic preface most obviously is.[2] "I, Alfred," it runs, "by the grace of God, dignified with the honour of royalty, have understood and have often heard from reading holy books that we to whom God hath given so much eminence of worldly distinction, have peculiar need at times to humble and subdue our minds to the divine and spiritual law, in the midst of this earthly anxiety:" . . . "that I may now and then contemplate the heavenly things in the midst of these earthly troubles."

In the *Pastoral Care* the King carefully followed the text of the Latin, neither adding nor omitting anything in a revered book of such authority by the spiritual founder of Saxon Christianity. And in a first essay he proceeded with scrupulous attention to his

[1] Now deposited in the Taylor Museum, Oxford, and described in a new work by Professor Earle — *The Alfred Jewel, an Historical Essay*. 1901. Clarendon Press. Cr. 8vo.

[2] Professor Earle's essay in joint volume, p. 198.

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original. As he advanced in scholarship and literary skill, he became much more free, until in the *Boethius* he uses the Latin almost as a text for his own meditations. In the translation of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*,[1] Alfred omits many sections, of which he gives a list; but he adds nothing, although there were many points as to the history of Wessex wherein he might have corrected and supplemented Bede's meagre statements. The translation keeps fairly well to the original, but it has no special literary value. The next translation of the King was the *History of the World* by Orosius,[2] which St. Augustine suggested as a companion to his own argument, in the *City of God*, that the wars and desolation of the Roman world were not caused by the spread of the Gospel. It was the only book known in the Middle Ages as a universal history, and it was as such that Alfred put it forth. But, as his object was essentially to educate, he adds full explanations of matters which Saxons would not easily follow, and his very elaborate additions on geography, the topography of the German peoples, the account of the Baltic and Scandinavia by the Norseman, Ohthere, have a freshness, a distinctness, and precision which peculiarly stamp the organising and eager grasp of a born explorer, who believed with the Prophet—"many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased."

[1] Bæda's *Ecclesiastical History*. Text and modern English, by T. Miller (E. E. Text Society), 1890–1898.

[2] *Orosius*. Text and Latin by H. Sweet (E. E. Text Society), and also by Thorpe, in Pauli's *Life*, translated. See Note 1, p. 5.

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We come now to Alfred's *Boethius*, far the most important work of his pen. It is almost an original treatise, so great are the variations, additions to, and omissions from the Latin text. Whole chapters are dropped by the translator, and page after page of new thoughts are inserted. Some idea of the extent of this paraphrasing may be got, when we find the first *twelve* pages of the Latin compressed into *two* of Alfred's, and nearly the whole of the last book of the Latin, occupying fifteen octavo pages, dropped altogether, and new matter of the King's, filling nine pages, inserted. Alfred took the *Meditations* of Boethius as a standard text-book of moral and religious thought, and he uses it as the basis of his own musings upon man, the world, and God. Alfred intends his book to be for the edification of his own people. And, accordingly, he drops most of the classical philosophy; expands and explains the mythological and poetic allusions; and changes the Platonic theism of Boethius into Biblical and Christian divinity. The transformation is astonishing. As we read the Latin we find it difficult to understand why a book so abstract, and in places so metaphysical and technical, held the world of European culture for a thousand years down to the age of Shakespeare. But, when we turn to Alfred's piece, we are in the world of those poignant searchings of heart which pervade the *Psalms* of David, the *Imitation of Christ*, and the devotional books of Jeremy Taylor.

The millenary commemoration of the King has

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drawn fresh attention both to Boethius and to Alfred's translation, and we may say that it is only in recent years that we have had adequate studies of both. Dr. Hodgkin's *Italy and her Invaders* and Mr. Stewart's excellent volume on *Boethius*[1] have collected in convenient form almost everything that is known about the Roman philosopher. And quite lately Mr. Sedgefield, of Melbourne and Cambridge universities, has published two books on Alfred's version: the first, a critical edition of the Anglo-Saxon text from the manuscript with a Glossary, the second a version in modern English prose, and an alliterative version of the metres.[2] Both the text and the modern rendering by Mr. Sedgefield are an immense improvement both in accuracy, scholarship, and elegance on the earlier editions whether of the old or the new versions. And it is only now, by Mr. Sedgefield's aid, and with the essays by the Bishop of Bristol and Professor Earle in the recent volume *Alfred the Great*, 1899, edited by the Hon. Secretary of the Millenary Commemoration Committee, and with Mr. Stopford Brooke's excellent chapter in his book already cited, that the real power of Alfred's work can be fully understood.

This is not the occasion to enlarge on the story of

[1] *Italy and her Invaders*, by Dr. T. Hodgkin, second edition, 1896. Vol. III, chap. xii. Oxford University Press. *Boethius.* An essay by Hugh Fraser Stewart, 1891. 8vo.

[2] *King Alfred's Old English Version of Boethius de Consolatione Philosophiæ*, by Walter J. Sedgefield, Oxford University Press, 1899, and *King Alfred's Version of the Consolations of Boethius, done into Modern English*, by the same. Oxford University Press, 1900.

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Boethius himself, or the strange fortune of his famous book. Dr. Hodgkin has given good reason to think that his political career was not one of such perfect loyalty and wisdom. And, if Alfred's introduction and zealous defence of him contains, as is probable, the church tradition about his life and death, Theodoric might fairly regard him as an enemy and a traitor. The King tells us that Boethius cast about within himself how he might wrest the sovereignty from the unrighteous King of the Goths, and that he sent word privily to the Cæsar at Constantinople to help the Romans back to their Christian faith and their old laws.

If Theodoric had grounds to believe that Boethius was really taking part in a conspiracy to urge the Eastern emperor to do what, in the next generation, Justinian did when he destroyed the Gothic kingdom in Italy, he would naturally treat the great Roman chief of the senate as a conspirator. It is not so improbable that the story, which Alfred may have heard at Rome itself not more than three hundred years after the fall of the Gothic kingdom, and which he treats as ample justification of Boethius, was the true story, or, if greatly exaggerated, still having a substantial basis in fact. If so, Theodoric did not suddenly become a ferocious tyrant; and St. Severinus, as Boethius was called in the church, lost his life and liberty in an abortive and very dangerous clerical conspiracy to destroy the Goths and restore Italy to the Greek empire.

But the special point to which I wish to call your

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attention is the literary beauty of Alfred's own work. I estimate that about one-quarter of the whole book is original matter and not translation. There are seldom two consecutive pages in which new matter does not occur; and there are nine consecutive pages, in Mr. Sedgefield's editions both of the Saxon and the modern English, which are Alfred's original, so that we are well able to judge both matter and form of the King's work. Indeed, the *Consolations* of Alfred differ from that of Boethius as much as the *Confessions* of St. Augustine differ from the ethical Treatises of Seneca.

The *Consolation of Philosophy* seems to have had a curious attraction for translators in many languages. Mr. Stewart (in his sixth chapter) has given an interesting account of a great many of these, both English and foreign. The list of them fills many pages in the British Museum Catalogue. Mr. Sedgefield gives a long account of English translations in prose and verse, beginning with Chaucer, just five hundred years after Alfred, and continuing down to that of H. R. James in 1897. In all, Mr. Sedgefield gives specimens of no less than fourteen versions, from Chaucer to the present day, of which five are in prose. The most interesting of these versions are the two in prose: one by Chaucer at the end of the fourteenth century, one by our Queen Elizabeth at the end of the sixteenth century. We have thus ample opportunity for comparing the work of Alfred with that of other translators in the course of no less than five centuries. And I cannot withhold my own deliberate conviction that, as

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prose literature, the version of Alfred, in its simplicity, dignity, and power, is a finer type than any of the successors.

This is truly wonderful when we remember that the first translation is that of our great poet, Geoffrey Chaucer. But poets do not always write fine prose; and in the fourteenth century English prose was in a conglomerate and formless state. I will illustrate this by one or two instances, setting Alfred's prose beside that of Chaucer. Of course, to make myself intelligible, I shall transliterate Alfred's Anglo-Saxon into current English, using Mr. Sedgefield's admirable version. But this version is not really a translation. It follows the words of Alfred punctiliously, often changing nothing or little in the order, and removing little but the terminals and archaic forms of the words. This is transliteration, but not translation. I need not go into the question whether Alfred's Anglo-Saxon is English. He calls it English, and in spite of differences of construction, syntax, grammar, and vocables, it is the basis of English: perhaps two-thirds of it closely akin to some English dialects as spoken within a few centuries ago. The fact that the ordinary English reader cannot read a line of it, is not conclusive. He cannot read a line of Layamon's *Brut* or the *Ancren Riwle*,[1] both about a century and a half after the Conquest; nor indeed could he read a paragraph written phonetically in pure Scottish or Yorkshire dialect.

[1] *Specimens of Early English*, by Morris & Skeat. Oxford University Press.

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I shall not enter on the question whether Alfred is the founder of *English* prose. Alfred certainly wrote or dictated a fine, organic, rhythmical prose in the mother-tongue used by himself and his people in the southwest and centre of England. Three-fourths of the words in that tongue survive in some altered form in English speech and its dialectic varieties. Whether it be the same language as English, depends on what we mean by that phrase. Grammar, syntax, pronunciation, have changed. The words mostly remain under modern disguises. I am not satisfied by the trenchant decision of Professor Marsh (*Origin and History of the English Language*). I prefer the views of Skeat, Morris, Earle, Green, and Stopford Brooke. I do not say as they do, that Alfred founded *English* prose. But in any case, he founded a prose in the language which is the basis of English.

I now give parallel passages from Alfred and from Chaucer. I take first Alfred's rendering of the fifth metre of Boethius's first book: the grand hymn — *O stelliferi conditor orbis.* Alfred's prose version is this, using always Mr. Sedgefield: —

"O thou Creator of heaven and earth, that rulest on the eternal throne, Thou that makest the heavens to turn in swift course, and the stars to obey Thee, and the sun with his shining beams to quench the darkness of black night: — (I omit four lines) Thou that givest short hours to the days of winter, and longer ones to those of summer, Thou that in harvest-tide with the strong North-east wind spoilest the trees of their leaves, and again in lenten-tide givest them fresh ones with

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the soft south-west winds, lo! all creatures do Thy will, and keep the ordinances of Thy commandments, save man only; he setteth Thee at naught." (Sedgefield, p. 5.)

Now here we have rhythm, force, dignity, and purity of phrase. This is fine literary prose — as Mr. Stewart well says, "his prose is informed with intensity and fire, and possesses all the vigour and swing of verse." Or, as Professor Earle says, it has "a very genuine elevation without strain or effort." It is true that in Mr. Sedgefield's English the order of words and the terminations are varied; but the original has to my ear the same fine roll: —

Eala thu scippend heofenes and eorthan, thu the on tha ecan setle ricsast, thu the on hroedum foerelde thone heofon ymbhweorfest, and tha tunglu thu gedest the gehyrsume.[1]

I now turn to Chaucer's[2] prose version of the same passage, modernising the orthography: —

"O thou maker of the wheel that beareth the stars, which that art fastened to thy perdurable chair, and turnest the heaven with a ravishing sway, and constrainest the stars to suffer thy law; so that the moon sometime shining with her full horns, meeting with all the beams of the sun, her brother, hideth the stars that be less; and sometime, when the moon, pale with her dark horns, approacheth the sun, loseth her lights: . . . Thou restrainest the day by shorter dwelling, in the time of cold winter that maketh the leaves to fall.

[1] Sedgefield's *Anglo-Saxon* text, p. 10.

[2] *The Complete Works of Chaucer*, by W. W. Skeat, D.C.L. Seven volumes. 8vo. Oxford University Press, 1894–1897, Vol. II, p. 16.

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Thou dividest the swift tides of the night, when the hot summer is come. Thy might attempereth the variant seasons of the year; so that Zephyrus, the debonair wind, bringeth again in the first summer season the leaves that the wind hight Boreas hath reft away in autumn, that is to say, in the last end of summer. There is nothing unbound from his old law, nor forsakes the work of his proper estate. O thou governour governing all things by certain end, why refusest thou only to govern the works of men by due manner."

Let us turn to the version of Queen Elizabeth, made exactly two centuries later:—

"O framer of starry circle
who leaning to the lasting groundstone
With whirling blast heavens turnest
and Law compellst the skies to bear,
Now that with full horn,
meeting all her brother's flames
the lesser stars the moon dims
Now dark and pale her horn." [1]

But I cannot inflict on you any more of her Majesty's doggrel. She should have sent for Spenser or Shakespeare to help her, if she was bent on poetry.

Here is a specimen of the Queen's prose:—

"This, when with continual woe I had burst out, seeing her with mild countenance nothing moved by my moans: 'When thee,' quoth she, 'sad and wailing I saw, straight a wretch and exile I knew thee, but how far off thy banishment was, but that thou toldest, I knew not.'"

What a rigmarole in Queen's English! A question

[1] *Elizabeth's Boethius* (E. E. Text Society, 1899). Manuscripts Record Office, Domestic Elizabeth, 289.

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may be asked — how can it be that the Saxon of Alfred in the ninth century can bear any comparison with the English of Chaucer in the fourteenth century, much less with the prose in the age of Shakespeare, Bacon, and Hooker in the sixteenth century? The answer I think is this. The old English of Alfred was a very simple, perfectly pure, and unmixed dialect of the great Gothic family of languages, of the Low-German class. It is homogeneous, with a limited vocabulary, using case endings like Latin, and not many prepositions. It was an easy instrument to wield, and a man of genius, nurtured in the poetry of centuries, could at once become master of it. In the age of Chaucer, English had become enormously increased in its vocabulary; thousands of French and Latin words were being assimilated or tried; the structural form had been changed; and English prose was in a chaotic state, a state of solution. Chaucer's prose is immeasurably inferior to his verse. He did make a verse rendering of the fifth metre of Book II — *Felix nimium prior aetas*[1] which makes us long that he had translated Boethius's whole work into poetry, not into prose. Prose, as every one knows, is a plant of much slower growth than poetry. I am prepared to say it is more difficult, and in its highest flights a gift far more rare. And even in the age of Elizabeth, seven hundred years after Alfred, English prose was

[1] Given by Skeat in his *Chaucer*, Vol. I, p. 380. Slightly modernised it runs: —

"A blissful life, a peaceful and a sweet,
Ledden the peoples in a former age —"

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only becoming perfectly organic in the hands of Hooker and Bacon.

But my purpose was not to make comparisons, but to direct attention to the dignity and beauty of Alfred's own thoughts. And for that end I will take a few passages which are Alfred's own, not translations from Boethius. Here is a bit from his introduction: —

"But cruel King Theodoric heard of these designs, and straightway commanded that Boethius be thrust into a dungeon and kept locked therein. Now, when this good man fell into so great straits, he waxed sore of mind, by so much the more that he had once known happier days. In the prison he could find no comfort; falling down, grovelling on his face, he lay sorrowing on the floor, in deep despair, and began to weep over himself, and to sing: and this was his song." (S. p. 2.)

What simple, pure, and rhythmical English, as formed and lucid as the English of Bunyan or of Defoe!

Another bit of Alfred's own, and what is so rare with him, a simile. Philosophy says: —

"When I rise aloft with these my servants (*i.e.* true wisdom and various skill) we look down upon the storms of this world, even as the eagle does when he soars in stormy weather above the clouds where no winds can harm him." (S. p. 2.)

Alfred is never more himself than when musing on his royal office: —

"Power is never a good thing, save its possessor be good, for, when power is beneficent, this is due to the man who wields it. Ye need not take thought for power nor endeavour

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after it, for if ye are only wise and good it will follow you, even though ye seek it not." (S. p. 35.)

What a magnificent Te Deum is this!

"One Creator there is without any doubt, and He is the ruler of heaven and earth and of all creatures, visible and invisible, even God Almighty. Him serve all things that serve, they that know Him and they that know Him not, they that know they are serving Him and they that know it not. He hath established unchanging habits and natures and likewise natural concord among all His creatures, even as He hath willed, and for as long as He hath willed; and they shall remain for ever." (S. p. 50.)

Hear how the head of the royal house of Cerdic, after some four centuries of kingly descent, speaks of nobility of birth:—

"Lo! all men had the like beginning, coming from one father and one mother, and they are still brought forth alike. Why then do ye men pride yourselves above others without cause for your high birth, seeing ye can find no man but is high-born, and all men are of like birth, if ye will but bethink you of their beginning and their Creator? True high birth is of the mind, not of the flesh; and every man that is given over to vices forsaketh his Creator, and his origin, and his birth, and loseth rank till he fall to low estate." (S. p. 75.)

Alfred takes small count of evil rulers. He says:—

"We see them seated on high seats; bright with many kinds of raiment, decked with belts and golden-hilted swords and war dress of many kinds. . . . But if thou wert to strip off his robes from such an one, and take away his company of retainers, then thou wouldst see that he is no more than any

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one of the courtiers who minister to him, if it be not some one of even lower degree." (S. p. 128.)

When we reach the grand prose hymn with which the book closes, I can find nothing more nobly expressed in the thousand years of English literature of which Alfred is the John the Baptist.

"To God all is present, both that which was before and that which is now, yea, and that which shall be after us; all is present to Him. His abundance never waxeth, nor doth it ever wane. He never calleth aught to mind, for He hath forgotten naught. He looketh for naught, pondereth naught, for He knoweth all. He seeketh nothing, for He hath lost nothing. He pursueth no creature, for none may flee from him; nor doth He dread aught, for none is more mighty than He, none is like unto Him. He is ever giving, yet He never waneth in aught. He is ever Almighty, for He ever willeth good and never evil. He needeth nothing. He is ever watching, never sleeping. He is ever equally beneficent. He is ever eternal, for the time never was when He was not, nor ever shall be. . . . Pray for what is right and needful for you, for He will not deny you. Hate evil, and flee from it. Love virtue and follow it. Whatsoever ye do is ever done before the Eternal and Almighty God; He seeth it all, and all He judges and will requite." (S. p. 174.)

I do not pretend to be a judge of sacred poetry; but I almost doubt if Dante, or À Kempis, or Milton have poured forth any psalm more truly in a devout spirit. I hold it to be in the way of pure and nervous English as fine as any similar outpouring in our language.

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I do not touch on the difficult points in the Alfred manuscripts. These technicalities I leave to the experts. But I think the "experts" have been too positive in rejecting pieces on some very slight suggestion in orthography and dialect. From the literary point of view, I see no reason to deny the authenticity of the simple *Proem*, and still less of the noble *Prayer* which ends the *Consolations*. Both are to my mind instinct with the mother-wit, primeval simplicity, and God-fearing soul of the purest of kings, and the most spiritual of warriors and statesmen.

Nor need we discuss at length the vexed problem of the authenticity of the alliterative verses translating the poetry of Boethius, which are appended to the Cotton (Otho A. vi) manuscript. This has been treated mainly as a question of paleography and dialect; and the experts are divided and doubtful. I see no reason to doubt the conclusion of Mr. Stopford Brooke and of Mr. Sedgefield, that no good ground has yet been given to doubt that Alfred wrote the verse as well as the prose. The *Proem*, which I hold to be Alfred's dictation, distinctly says that after he had "turned the book from Latin into English prose he wrought it up once more into verse." The verse is not altogether poetry; it cannot compare with Beowulf and Caedmon. But to my ear it has the ring of Alfred's manly and native voice.

I will go on to say that even as verse these pieces do not seem to me quite so poor. Alfred, like many of us who love poetry, cannot compose poetry. And

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we do know some enthusiasts who persist in writing verses, when they know (or ought to know) that they cannot compose poetry. Alfred's verses seem to me the kind of lines that a great prose-writer, one who loved and studied poetry, but was not a born poet, might indite to occupy his hours of meditation. I confess I think there is a good ring in these lines: —

"Over Jove's mountain
Gorgèd with glory,
In fight with foemen.
Fluttered on the staff.
All Italy over
came many a Goth
greedy to wrestle
The banner flashing
Freely the heroes
were eager to roam.

The wielders of bucklers,
Even to Jove's mount
Where in mid sea-streams
That mighty island,
bearing onward
far on to ocean
Sicily lieth,
far famed of lands."

(S. p. 178.)

Here is the metrical alliterative version of the grand prayer — *O stelliferi conditor Orbis* — of which we have just had the prose version: —

"O Thou Creator
Of heaven and of earth;
Reignest eternal —
All swiftly rollest
The lights of heaven
of bright constellations,
Thou on thy high-seat
Thou the round heaven
Thou by thy holy might
causest to hear Thee."

(S. p. 182.)

I will not say that this is poetry; but it is, I think, as good as Sternhold and Hopkins's *Psalms of David.*

Here is a bit which has a touch of imagination in it — not entirely that of Boethius. The verse is more vivid: —

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"Feather-wings have I fleeter than a bird's
With which I may fly far from the earth
Over the high roof of the heaven above us;
But oh! that I might thy mind furnish,
Thy inmost wit, with these my wings,
Until thou mightest on this world of mortals,
On all that there liveth look down from on high."

(S. p. 222.)

Before I close, I will remind you of the judgment passed on Alfred's books by the accomplished historian of English literature — Mr. Stopford Brooke. "He was," he says, "the creator and then the father of English prose literature." His books "were the origin of English prose." The personal element, as he adds, stands forth clear in all his literary work. Mr. Stopford Brooke does not, I hold, quite do justice to Alfred's literary power as a translator when he says he had no creative power. Was not the translation of the Bible into English, yea, into German, perhaps into Latin also, a literary masterpiece, even though the translators inserted no new ideas of their own, or rather did not do so of malice aforethought? A great translation is a masterpiece; and two at least of Alfred's books are masterpieces in translation. But Mr. Stopford Brooke does full justice to Alfred's style as a writer. And to create the style of a new literature, to found the prose style of a nation, is a supreme literary triumph. Whether Alfred founded English prose style, is a question of the meaning of the phrase. Alfred, King of various tribes, then dwelling in England, composed in the vernacular a regular prose style not matched

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by any prose in England until the translators of the Psalms and Job, and in quiet force, simplicity, and purity not surpassed until the age of Addison.

We all know the often quoted, often misquoted phrase of Buffon, — *le style est l'homme même.* Of no one could this be said more truly — I venture to say so truly — as of Alfred. The whole range of ancient and modern literature contains nothing more genuine, more natural, more pellucid. He is not composing a book to be studied, admired, or criticised. He is baring his whole soul to us. He speaks as one on his knees, in the silence of his own chamber, in the presence of his God, who is pouring forth his inmost thoughts, hopes, and sorrows to the all-seeing eye, which knoweth the secrets of every heart, from whom nothing is hidden or unknown. And as he opens to us his own soul, as freely as he would bare it to his Maker, we look down into one of the purest, truest, bravest hearts that ever beat within a human frame.

And by virtue of his noble simplicity of nature, this warrior, this ruler, this hero achieved a literary feat; for he created a prose style five centuries before Chaucer, seven centuries before Shakespeare or Bacon, eight centuries before Addison or Defoe, and the full mastery of simple English prose. This in itself is a fact peculiarly rare in the history of any literature, where prose comes so much later than poetry. It can only be explained by remembering that the language which Alfred spoke and wrote was not exactly early English, nor middle English, much less that highly composite and

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tessellated mosaic we call the latest and contemporary English. It was but the bony skeleton of our English, what the Palatine mount of Romulus was to imperial Rome, what Wessex was to the present empire of the Queen. But it was the bones of our common tongue; it was the bones with the marrow in them, ready to be clothed in flesh and equipped with sinews and nerves. But this simple and unsophisticated tongue the genius of our Saxon hero so used and moulded that he founded a prose style, and taught the English race to trust to their own mother-tongue from the first; to be proud of it, to cultivate it, to record in it the deeds of their ancestors, and to hand it on as a national possession to their children. To this it is due (as Professor Earle so truly says) that "we alone of all European nations have a fine vernacular literature in the ninth and tenth and eleventh centuries," so that neither the French immigration, nor any other immigration has ever been able to swamp our English language. And when I say *We*, I do not mean *Britons*. I mean You of the Western Continent as much as us in the British islands. Alfred was as much your teacher, your ancestor, your hero, as he was ours. He spoke that tongue, he founded that literature, which is imperishable on both sides of the Atlantic, which is one of the chief glories of the human race, which the three corners of the world shall never be able to swamp by any immigration of any foreign speech — whilst we who are set to guard our common tongue, in the words of our great poet, to ourselves do rest but true.

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